The Aesthetics of Death in Margaret Edson's Wit

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Abstract

This paper tries to shed light on Margret Edson's treatment of the subject of death in her play Wit (1991). Death is used to be the horrible fact in life and usually presented on the stage frightful and detestable. The paper shows how the playwright succeeds in turning this horrible fact into something highly educational that needs not to be afraid of due to the fact that it is a step towards the everlasting life.

فنية الموت في مسرحية وت للكاتبة مارغريت اديسون

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المستخلص

يدرس البحث ثيمة الموت في مسرحية وت للكاتبة مارغريت اديسون (1991) بالرغم من ان الموت حدث مرعب في حياة البشر الا ان اديسون استطاعت ان تضفي طابعا رومانسيا علية حيث قدمت الموت على انه شيء غير مرعب كونة الخطوة النهائية الى الحياه تلابدية.

Margaret Edson was born in July 4, 1961 in Washington. Her mother, a medical social worker, and her father, a newspaper columnist, encouraged her high school drama interests. She got her bachelor's degree in Renaissance history from Smith College in 1983. In 1985 she became an oncology and AIDS patient clerk at the National Cancer Institute in Bethesda, Maryland, where she witnessed protocols being developed to treat patients for ovarian cancer and HIV. In 1991, she wrote *Wit* from her observing the medical teams and patients on the Ward and from listening. (1)

Although the play has been a subject of study in medical schools, especially in courses on medical ethics and medical humanities, this paper tries to shed light on Edson's treatment of the subject of death. Death is used to be the horrible fact in life and usually presented on the stage frightful and detestable. The paper shows how the playwright succeeds in turning this horrible fact into something highly educational that needs not to be afraid of due to the fact that it is a step towards the everlasting life.

The play presents Vivian Bearing, (2) a scholar of seventeenth century English poetry, diagnosed with deadly ovarian cancer. Assigned for treatment to the research hospital at her university, she comes under the care of Harvey Kelekian, head of medical oncology. Right from the beginning of the play, Miss Bearing addresses her audience directly: "Hi. How are you feeling today?" (*Wit*: 7). A question that she has been asked several times. She also informs the audience: "I think I die at the end." (p.7). So the play focuses on Bearing's journey towards death.

Edson manipulates different methods to prove that death is not frightful.

1. The connection between two of Donne's Holy sonnets to the play and to the idea of death leads to the understanding of the play as well as grasping the portrait of death. Early in the play Miss Bearing declares:

> I know all about life and death. I am after all a scholar of Donne's Holy Sonnets which explore mortality in greater depth than any other body of work in English language. And I know for a fact that I am tough. A demanding professor. Uncompromising." (p:13).

Then Bearing recalls a dialogue with her professor E.M.Ashford in which she ordered her to do her essay on Donne's holy sonnet, (Death be not Proud) again.

> E.M: you must begin with a text, Miss Bearing, not with a feeling ... in this edition you chose, this profoundly simple meaning is sacrificed to hysterical punctuation. ...
> This sonnet begins with a valiant struggle of intellect and drama to vanquish the enemy. But it is ultimately about overcoming the seemingly insuperable barriers separating life, death, and eternal life... Nothing but a breath – a comma – separates life from life everlasting. It is very simple really. With the original punctuation restored, death is no longer something to act on a stage, with exclamation on points. It's a comma, a pause ... Life, death, soul, God, past, present. Not insuperable barriers, not semicolons but a comma. (p: 14-15)

In such punctuation, death is not the opposite of life, but a pause between life and life everlasting. Addressing death with Donne's words reveals the fact that professor Bearing does not regard death frightful and believes that it is no more than a pause between this life and the everlasting life. Bearing's agreement to have a very painful course of treatment enhances the idea that she has a great courageous soul:

> Kelekian: This treatment is the strongest thing we have to offer you. And, As research, it will make a significant Contribution to our knowledge.
>
> Bearing: Knowledge, yes. (p,12)

The second poem which could be easily imagined as the Donnean origin of *Wit* is "Hymn to God. My God in My Sicknesse". In this poem the speaker is similar to professor Bearing lying on bed because of a fatal disease from which he does not expect to recover. (3) He describes himself stretched out:

> Whilst my physitians by their love are growne cosmographers, and I their Mapp, who lie flat on this bed, that by them may be shown. (Gardner: p: 89).

The connections between these physicians and those who attend professor Bearing can easily be drawn. Here the speaker contemplates his soul's last

journey. The physicians' love for the patient has led them to turn him into a "Mapp". They have made his body like a series of signs which they may read. The patient will die. The only question is how and what strait the soul will make its exit from one life to the next. The medical team of professor Bearing know well that patients do not survive stage four metastatic ovarian cancer. Thus, their 'love' for her turns her into a set of signs to be read. The irony is that the medical doctors are doing to her what she has often done to a literal text. (4) As she observes them, she contemplates:

> Full of subservience, hierarchy, gratitious displays, sublimated rivalries – I feel right at home. It is just like a graduate seminar. With one important difference: in Grand Rounds, they read me like a book. Once I did the teaching, now I am taught. (P:32)

Like Donne's poem, Miss Bearing must turn her attention to what she must do then. Such turning is very necessary for the preparation for death. Her own spiritual self examination must be as rigorous as the scrutinizing her physicians employ. Such treatment will be painful. The reader should not miss the truth Bearing reveals while she is taking an eight-month course of cancer treatment: "It is highly educational. I am learning to suffer" (p: 27)

The idea that suffering may be a vehicle of God's mercy is crucial to understand *Wit.* What has gone unappreciated about the play is that professor Bearing's suffering is as Donne suggests, a means to correction, and ultimately salvation. In an interview, Edson has explained that critics have not paid attention to the religious aspect of her play: "the play is about redemption and I'm surprised no one mentions it. Grace is the opportunity to experience God in spite of yourself, which is what Dr. Bearing ultimately achieves." (5)

Bearing's illness humiliates her breaking down her pride to prepare her for a childlike faith. Her suffering is a good thing for it brings salvation. this sounds very strange to the contemporary audience who regards suffering as an evil thing.

Professor Bearing convinces herself she can handle the treatment by saying, "All right. Contribution to knowledge. Eight cycles of chemotherapy. Give me the full dose every time." (p:15). But she would be mistaken to put her ultimate trust in modern medicine. On the other hand, professor Bearing appears to be inhuman in her teaching methods. Her academic pursuits and her ability to anatomize poetry have shaped her personality. Her toughness is evident while she narrates directly to the audience. She recalls several encounters with her former students. Professor Bearing responds to one student:

> You can come to this class prepared, or you can excuse yourself from this class, this department, and this university. Do not think for a moment that I will tolerate anything in between." (p:48)

In a subsequent scene, one of her students tries to obtain an extension on the essay due to the death of her grandmother, professor Bearing replies:

> "Do what you will, but the paper is due when it is due." (p:51)

But professor Bearing begins to shift away from her cold, calculating ways in the latter half of the play. She and the nurse Susie share a popsicle (6) and discuss palliative care issues. Susie also calls her sweetheart, something professor Bearing never would have allowed in the past. After Susie leaves, Bearing talks to the audience:

> Bearing: Popsicles? "Sweetheart?" I can't believe my life has become so … corny. But it can't be helped." (p:55)

Later on her monologue, she explains:

> Now is not the time for verbal swordplay, for unlikely flights of imagination and wildly shifting perspectives, for metaphorical conceits, for wit. And nothing would be worse than a detailed scholarly analysis. Erudition. Interpretation. Complication. Now is the time for simplicity. Now is the time for, dare I say it, kindness. (p:35)

2. Bearing's appreciation of knowledge turns to be a motivating force as she braces herself for chemotherapy although such course of treatment is very painful. Sometimes, we find her sarcastic using humorous language.(7)

This reveals the courageous soul of her character for in such cases a character is usually found gloomy and sad.

In an interesting scene, Dr. Kelekian and Miss Bearing fuss over the meaning of an unclear word:

> Kelekian: You present with a growth, went undetected in stages one, two, and three. Now it is an insidious

adenocarcinoma, which has spread from the primary adnexal mass.
Vivian: "insidious"?
Kelekian: "insidious" means undetectable at all.
Vivian: "insidious" means treacherous.
Kelekian: Shall I continue?
Vivian: By all means. (P: 9)

Vivian uses humorous language to help her deal with sickness. Once she talks to the audience:

"I have stage four metastatic ovarian cancer. There is no stage five." (P: 13)

Another time she is reviewed by a technician who is talking to her but not communicating with her:

Technician 1: Name?
Vivian: Lucy, countess of Bedford.
Tech 1: I don't see it here.
Vivian: My name is Vivian Bearing.
B-E-A-R-I-N-G. Dr. Kelekian is my doctor.

Another example of such humour when she talks with Posner, although he does not seem to get it:

Jason: What do you do for exercise?
Vivian: Pace.
Jason: Are you having sexual relations?
Vivian: Not at the moment. (p: 23-24)

When she vomits as a result of chemotherapy, she turns to the audience:

Vivian: You may remark that my vocabulary has taken a turn for the Anglo-Saxon. (p: 28)

3. Accepting her friends' sympathy proves the shift in her character and frees her to express the reality of her illness in human terms, "my cancer is not being cured, is it?" (P: 53). She turns to Susie for compassion and forgiveness. With Susie beside her, she no longer fears the failure of medical treatment. Susie

provides comfort for Bearing's aching soul. Bearing's transformation is enhanced by another accident when she is visited by her former Professor Ashford at the end of the play. Ashford sits besides Bearing and offers to recite a poem by Donne. Seeing Bearing's unwillingness to hear, Ashford chooses a book for children and reads The Runaway Bonny. The little bird likes to run away from its mother:

E.M. Ashford: ……. Once there was a little bunny who wanted to run away.
So he said to his mother, "I am running away."

"If you run away," said the mother," I will run after you.
For you are my little bunny."

"If you run after me," said the little bunny, "I will become
A fish in a trout stream and I will swim away from you."

"If you become a fish in a trout stream," said the mother,
"I will become a fisherman and I will fish for you."

Ashford then gives her interpretation, "Look at that. A little allegory of the soul. No matter where it hides, God will find it. See, Vivian? (P: 62-63). Only with such transformation, Bearing is able to overcome pride which separates her from God and obtain salvation.

4. Edson is able to use the dilemmas of the medical research to enhance her central theme (Vivian's journey towards death). Her protagonist is not a merely sick patient but a subject of further scientific discovery. The physicians who attend Vivian are not supposed to harm her but what happened is quite the contrary for Jason and Dr. Kelekian's main concern is to get the utmost benefit of how to use drugs to treat other women with ovarian cancer.(8)

5. In the final scene, Vivian Bearing shows another instance of courage when she agrees with Susie that the medical team should not "resuscitate" (9) when the hour comes. Thus she expresses a willingness to die depriving death of its mightiness.

6. In the last moments of her life, Vivian Bearing steps out of bed and begins to walk away towards a white light. She removes her hospital bracelets, the cap

covering her baldness, and finally her blanket. For a moment she is naked and the lights go out. So she reaches the light. God is the light. By such an act, Vivian Bearing attains her salvation announcing the defeat of death.

Edson succeeds in her portrayal of death not as a frightful idea in life but as a transitional event that a person passes from one life to another. Her manipulation of two of Donne's holy sonnets enhances the idea that her protagonist is courageous and not frightened. The humorous language her protagonist sometimes uses during her course of treatment adds beauty to her work and definitely approves of the idea that the protagonist has a courageous soul in addition to the fact that pain and suffering are presented as good things and a necessity for correction and salvation.

Notes

1. Mahala Yates Stripling, Bioethics and Medical Issues in Literature. London: Greenwood Press, 2005. P: 152.

2-the protagonist's name bears some connotation. for Vivian carries connotation to life. While Bearing may evoke suffering. This is found in Shlomith Rimmon Kenan. "Margaret Edson's Wit and the art of Analogy." Style: Vol. 40, Number 4, winter 2006.

3.John D. Sykes, Wit, Pride and John Donne's Poetry. Renascence 55.2, (Winter,2003).

4. Ibid

5.Adrienne Martini. "The Playwright In Spite of Herself." American Theatre 16:8, (October 1999).

6."The simplest way to make a **popsicle** is to use a small paper cup or yogurt container, fill it with juice (or whatever else you choose to use as a base for popsicles) and put a **popsicle** stick into it as it firms up in the freezer."

This definition of Popsicle is taken from The American Heritage Dictionary in http://www.wordnik.com. 20/ November 2010.

7.Madeline M Keaveney, " Death Be Not Proud: An Analysis of Margaret Edson's Wit". Women and Language, Vol.40, Winter 2006.

8. According to the American Cancer Society,"

"Stage 4 is the last stage of ovarian cancer, also known as metastatic ovarian cancer. This means that the cancer has spread to other areas or organs in the body, such as the inside of the liver or the lungs. If the fluid around the lungs is found to have cancer cells in it, the cancer is also considered Stage 4. This stage of ovarian cancer has an 18 percent five-year survival rate." The website of this society is www.cancer.org.

9. Resuscitate means to revive, esp., from apparent death or from unconsciousness. http://dictionary.reference.com. 20/ November 2010.

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